

## Research Article

# Exploring Emerging Adulthood and Adverse Childhood Experiences' Effects on Psychosocial Well-Being

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Childhood experiences have been documented to influence the later life of individuals, especially in emerging adults, which is the immediate period after adolescence when young adults strive to define their identity and purpose. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events that occur before a child reaches the age of 18. The purpose of the study was to explore the emerging students' ACEs and the psychosocial effects in later life. Participants included 15 emerging adults (Males=6; Females=9) in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. An interview guide was used to gather data from the participants. Thematic analysis showed that the participants' ACEs have made them perceive life differently, which informs the way they view life satisfaction and also build relationships with others. Five themes were identified as: (1) identity formation; (2) belonging; (3) meaning making; (4) challenges and growth; and (5) suicide. It is recommended that mental health professionals should teach affected individuals some behavioural changes, including building resilience.

## Introduction

Emerging adulthood is a distinct life stage characterized by exploration, self-discovery, and the search for meaning and purpose. The period defines the age of people which spans between the ages of 18 to 25 years of life who are mostly in the developing or developed countries<sup>[1]</sup>. Jeffrey Arnett defined the period in his theory of emerging adulthood, as a time of experimentation, instability, and self-focus, often marked by significant life decisions, such as choosing a career, establishing relationships, and defining one's identity. The proposed new life became necessary as the lifestyle of people has changed in the last fifty years due to education and industrialisation. Most young people, especially women, in their late teens and early 20s during those years had either entered or had stable adult roles

in their work and family life<sup>[2]</sup>. Relatively, in those years, just a few people pursued education or training beyond secondary school. The majority of the females were not working outside their home. Averagely, in the 1960s, the marriage age for women in the United States and in most industrialised countries was around 20 and around 22 for men<sup>[1][2]</sup>.

The Ghana constitution states that people who turn 18 years are considered as adults and can take up adulthood roles like marriage and working<sup>[3]</sup>. These roles were to initiate and prepare the young ones for adulthood. The industrial revolution has changed the onset of these roles of the young adults whereby they have to pursue education and decide on a career path before starting family life, hence, the emerging adults. There are five distinctive characteristics of emerging adulthood. These are identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood, and a sense of broad possibilities for the future<sup>[1]</sup>. Researchers in some low-and-middle-income countries have identified that parenting style as well as discipline in schools can cause childhood trauma<sup>[4]</sup><sup>[5]</sup> (Lokot et al., 2020). According to these researchers, when parents use authoritarian parenting styles, their children tend to exhibit an inferiority complex, have low self-esteem, and lower academic success. These children are more hostile and aggressive and less popular with peers. Such children also tend to abuse substances in their adolescence and are less independent compared to children of non-authoritative parents. For many African cultures, verbal and physical abuse have become a normal part of child rearing, so that many children end up with multiple indices of adverse childhood experiences<sup>[4][5]</sup>.

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have been found to significantly influence the physical and mental health of individuals<sup>[6][7]</sup>. ACEs are traumatic events that occur before a child reaches the age of 18. ACEs may include experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect, witnessing violence in the home or community, having a family member who attempted or committed suicide, or growing up in a home where there are substance use problems, mental health problems, and instability due to parental separation or household members being in jail. These may threaten a child's sense of safety, stability, and bonding<sup>[6]</sup>. Children who go through ACEs do not only suffer immediate trauma, but may also be at higher risk for physical and mental health issues throughout their lifespan<sup>[8]</sup>. Studies have indicated high levels of anxiety and depression among university students who have had ACEs<sup>[9][10]</sup>. Childhood experiences have been documented to influence later life experiences of individuals in

terms of their intrapersonal and interpersonal wellbeing<sup>[11]</sup>. Childhood experiences may have either a positive or adverse influence on the wellbeing of an individual<sup>[9][12]</sup>.

Research and population surveys have proven that females report higher psychological distress than males<sup>[13][14][15]</sup>. The differences exist due to socio-economic variables, historical and contextual factors, and age<sup>[16][13][17]</sup>. Self-righting appraisal skills and social support help to build resilience in emerging adults who have suffered from ACEs. The ability to build resilience helps in positive growth, adjustment, and flexibility<sup>[18]</sup>. Traditional adult roles in some parts of Ghana (early marriage and childbirth and acquiring a career in one's geographical area) have been altered by the new role of the industrial age, where young people have to go through stress to create an identity and establish themselves in their career and family<sup>[14]</sup>. Adverse experiences in childhood may have a negative effect on children building secure attachment, which may result in mistrust for self and others, leading to anxious, avoidant, or disorganised attachment in adulthood (Clark et al., 2014). People with secure attachment are able to build confidence and trust, which helps to improve self-esteem, judgement, empathy, and interpersonal relationships<sup>[19]</sup>. People who have experienced some of these adversities may feel betrayed in relationships, be secretive and anxious, and lack a sense of safety, which may result in social isolation (Clark et al., 2014).

The current study sought to explore the effects of ACEs in emerging adulthood to provide valuable insights into how individuals navigate the challenges of identity, belonging, and purpose in this formative stage of life. The following research questions were framed to guide the study:

1. How do emerging adults who have experienced ACEs navigate their identity formation?
2. How do emerging adults who have experienced ACEs describe their sense of belonging?
3. Why do emerging adults who have experienced ACEs believe their experiences have affected their sense of meaning in life?

## Theoretical Review

The study used Adlerian theory by Alfred Adler and Choice theory by Dr. William Glasser to understand how the participants' past experiences and relations with caregivers and society are influencing their behaviour in the emerging adulthood period.

## *The Adlerian Theory by Alfred Adler*

The Adlerian theory explains how early life experiences may significantly influence later life development. Alfred Adler<sup>[20]</sup> believes that the individual begins to form an approach to life somewhere in the first 6 years of living. He focused on the person's subjective interpretation of reality (phenomenology) of early events, which continued to influence the person's present behaviour; that is, themes running through a person's life<sup>[21]</sup>. Adler<sup>[22]</sup> referred to the emerging adult's perceptions, thoughts, feelings, values, beliefs, convictions, and conclusions as their subjective reality, which has to do with the meanings they attached to their experiences. According to Adler<sup>[20]</sup>, emerging adults who have a sense of belonging will feel loved and form healthy, loving bonds with others. But those who feel not loved will act out to express that feeling of inadequacy. The emerging adult learns to overcome inferiority through the nurturing of parents and other interactions within their environment. Most often in Ghana, parents punish children's bad behaviour as a form of discipline to remove or reduce the bad behaviour<sup>[23]</sup>.

The Adlerian theory believes that children may misbehave because they feel discouraged, and because they do not make meaning out of parental discipline, they feel unloved, devalued, or unsupported. Adler sees social interest as the action for community feeling, which involves mutual concern between people. Community feeling is described as a feeling of belonging, which is characterised by courage, empathy, caring, compassion, engagement, and cooperation<sup>[21]</sup>. People strive to belong in the family system to ensure security, worthiness, and acceptance. Emerging adults who are not able to develop this community feeling become discouraged and develop antisocial behaviours such as addictions, suicide, self-hurting, and other mental health issues<sup>[21]</sup>. Adler<sup>[20]</sup> made the assumption that birth order had a significant and predictable impact on a child's personality and their feeling of inferiority. The birth order describes how the family dynamics and home environment influence the personality of a person.

## **Choice theory by Dr. William Glasser**

The Choice Theory by Dr. William Glasser<sup>[24]</sup> helped to explore the needs of emerging adults and their disappointment when the people around them, vis-à-vis the parents and other caregivers, do not meet their expectation of making them happy and satisfied in life. Glasser stated that each individual has the power to control the self and has limited power to control others, resulting in a conflict. It

emphasises that the development of close, caring relationships ensures the effective fulfilment of one's needs and achieves happiness. Glasser (1998) believes that genetically, human beings are wired with five basic needs he coined as genetic instructions (survival, love and belonging, power or achievement, freedom or independence, and fun or enjoyment) which drive the individual. The theory emphasised the need for love and belonging to be man's primary need, which explains why mental health challenges are often related to relationships.

Glasser therefore recommended adopting seven connecting relationship habits in all relationships. These are: supporting, encouraging, listening, accepting, trusting, respecting, and negotiating differences. He also cited seven disconnecting habits that are used to control people, resulting in misunderstandings and resentment, thereby breaking down relationships. These seven disconnecting habits are criticising, blaming, complaining, nagging, threatening, punishing, and bribing or rewarding to control. Emerging adults who faced criticism, harassment, and emotional and verbal abuse from caregivers with the intent of making them learn to achieve communal living ended up having challenges trusting others and developed low self-confidence with suicidal thoughts.

## **Method**

### *Research Design*

We approached the current study with the interpretivist paradigm, which asserts that there are multiple realities out there. Individuals make meaning through their interactions with their environment in their minds<sup>[25]</sup>. We adopted the qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological design to explore the multiple lived experiences and the meanings that the university students attached to their ACEs and their counselling-seeking behaviour using face-to-face interviews. In this study, each participant was interviewed four times. The first session was to familiarise the participants with the study and take them through the purpose of the study and clarify any questions. The second session was to interview them on the phenomenon and record their experiences, and the third session was to wrap up the interviews and complete gaps identified in the interview. The last meeting was scheduled after the recordings were transcribed for the participants to go through to check the authenticity of the recordings and also to appreciate them for availing themselves for the study.

## *Participants*

A combination of homogeneous purposive and snowball sampling techniques was used to sample the participants with the help of a priori thematic and data saturation. These sampling techniques are based on the research problem, purpose, and questions<sup>[26]</sup>. Homogeneous purposive sampling selects participants based on having similar characteristics because such characteristics are of particular interest to the research<sup>[26]</sup>. Given<sup>[27]</sup>, described snowballing as when existing research participants refer new potential participants whom they share a similar interest relevant to the current research or are members of the same group to the researcher. Inclusion criteria for selection of participants included the following: being in the age range of emerging adults, self-identifying as having experienced ACEs, and willingness to participate in the study.

The homogeneous purposive sampling technique helped to identify 6 participants (2 females and 4 males) who had reported their ACE challenges to the counselling centres and were willing to be part of the study, while the snowballing was used as participants who were selected through the homogeneous purposive technique also directed the lead researcher, a female, to some of their colleagues who had also suffered from ACEs to be included in the study. Nine participants (7 females and 2 males) were selected using the snowballing. The median age of participants was 24 years ( $M = 23.6$  years;  $SD = 2.47$ ). The majority of them ( $n = 12$ ; 80%) indicated they had suicidal ideations. Almost half ( $n = 7$ ; 46.7%) admitted they either use or are addicted to some substance. The majority ( $n = 12$ ; 80%) again indicated they were engaged in some form of intimate relationship.

## *Data Collection Procedure*

Ethical clearance was sought from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Professional Studies, Accra (Reference number: ECUPSA –SS-001-2023). Introductory letters from the Department of Counselling Psychology of the University of Education, Winneba, were submitted to the three selected public universities to seek permission for data collection. The lead researcher sought the consent of the participants to interview them, after which the participants answered the Adverse Childhood Experience Questionnaire to ascertain their scores and their eligibility for the study. The ACEs questionnaire is a 10-item questionnaire that seeks information about events that happened during a person's childhood before the age of 18. Participants have to answer "Yes" if the question applies to them and "No" if the question doesn't apply to them. The first 5 questions are centered on the abuse and neglect the participants went through before turning age 18, while the last 5 questions

ask the participants whether they witnessed people in their household going through any form of maltreatment or having a mental challenge. When scoring, each Yes answer was given 1 point, while a No answer was given 0 points. All the Yes points were tallied together to determine each participant's ACEs score, which ranged from 1-10 points. The ACEs scores of the individuals were not analysed further beyond their use for determining who can participate in the study or not.

A semi-structured interview guide designed by the authors was used in the data collection. Interviews were conducted by the first author. The questions in the interview guide were informed by the purpose of the study and the literature. Consideration was given to anonymity and confidentiality for participants in the study, hence the use of pseudonym names chosen by the participants. Field data were managed under the Data Protection Act, 2012<sup>[28]</sup> of Ghana. Each interview lasted approximately 30 – 40 minutes. The interviews were audio-taped using an electronic recorder and transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher of the study.

### *Data analysis*

Braun and Clarke's<sup>[29]</sup> thematic analysis framework was used for the data analysis. The first step was for the lead researcher to read and think through the data to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' emotional state about the phenomenon as a way of familiarization. The next step was to code the data. The process was completed by the lead researcher under the objectives of the study. The authors reviewed the identified codes, sub-themes, and themes for refinements to generate the report. Themes were formed using theoretical triangulation since the study is underpinned by theoretical reviews and also uses the interpretivist worldview<sup>[30]</sup>.

### *Methodological integrity*

To ensure data quality assurance and reliability, a number of tactics were used. The credibility of the study was ensured by the use of multiple transcript reviews and audio reviews of the interviews. The transcribed written summaries of the interviews were given to the participants for review and approval. All the researchers also read through the study and offered feedback. Prolonged engagements with the participants also ensured a deeper understanding of the phenomenon for the lead researcher and helped the participants to build trust. The written notes were used to complement the transcriptions, especially for the information that was not recorded on the tape recorder. The current study ensured transferability by providing a vivid description of the participants' accounts of

their experiences with ACEs. Confirmability was achieved through the keeping of a calendar of interviews and written activities. The participants were made to review the transcripts and all written documents at different stages of the study. All the researchers checked and reviewed the documents and critiqued them to ensure the dependability of the research findings.

## **Results**

### *Participants*

Participants included 15 emerging adults (9 females and 6 males) within the Greater Accra Region. Among the participants interviewed, 7 reported that their parents are still married, while 4 reported that their parents were divorced, and 4 were born out of wedlock. Most of the participants from broken homes reported some adverse experiences that they had with either the stepmother or father. Most of the participants born out of wedlock stayed with either their grandparents or other extended family members. See Table 1.



Participant Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Parental marriage status	ACEs Score	Suicidal Ideation/ Thought	Substance Abuse	Being in Relationship
Awurasi	20	F	Together	5	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lamisi	20	F	Out of wedlock	6	Yes	No	No
Yaw	25	M	Together	3	Yes	No	Yes
Elorm	28	M	Divorced	6	Yes	No	Yes
Candice	24	F	Together	7	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hajia	22	F	Together	4	Yes	No	No
Nips	24	M	Together	2	Yes	Yes	Yes
Tracy	22	F	Divorced	5	Yes	Yes	Yes
Abena	24	F	Together	6	No	Yes	Yes
Abla	27	F	Divorced	7	No	No	Yes
Akua	22	F	Out of wedlock	4	Yes	Yes	No
Nii	27	M	Divorced	8	No	No	Yes
Crystabel	22	F	Together	4	Yes	No	Yes
Ayitey	22	M	Out of wedlock	7	Yes	No	Yes
William	25	M	Out of wedlock	4	Yes	Yes	Yes

**Table 1.** Demographic Characteristics of Participants

### Themes

We observed 5 themes: (1) Identity formation; (2) Belonging; (3) Meaning making; (4) Challenges and growth; and (5) suicide.

### *Theme 1: Identity Formation and the Role of Inferiority*

Theme 1 is on the participants' identity formation and the role of inferiority. Some participants shared their different forms of abuse and humiliation they experienced in childhood and how those experiences have influenced how they perceive and interpret reality subjectively. The experiences of abuse and humiliation have made some of the participants develop an inferiority complex, which makes them come across as timid and nervous. For instance, some participants described their background and how this has defined how their caregivers brought them up. Ayitey described his childhood as a boy who was raised by a single mother and his grandmum in a poor home. He stated that the restrictions from the women who raised him have made him become a timid boy to the extent that he cannot even ride a bicycle. He feels boys should be trained by their fathers and not the other way round. Crystabel stated: *"It was not really funny. Yeah, I am the first child of five children, and they turn to use our childhood as junior mothers to your siblings, especially if you are the first-born daughter. I feel like it had a lot of responsibilities that I was not probably ready for at that age."* Nips added: *"Because I was the first-born, I was like their experiment. They were extra tough on me. I stepped into certain boundaries I should not have crossed in the name of enjoying my freedom because I was always under their control."* Emerging adults who are made to play adult roles at a younger age tend not to enjoy their childhood and are made to mature earlier than their age mates. The early experiences one had explain certain later life personalities, like Awurasi, who said; *"I feel like humiliation played a big role in my life; I am living with trust issues and anxiety."*

### *Theme 2: Belonging; Social Interest and Community*

The second theme looked at the participants' sense of belongingness in connection to social interest and community living. Most of the participants shared how much their experiences in childhood have influenced their commitment to the family and also in defining their friendships. To some participants, the absence of growing up with a single parent makes them feel they have been deprived of certain emotions in life, which they sought from others. Like Tracy put it, *"There is always this part of me who wants to have a father-daughter relationship, so when I make friends with the opposite sex, I intend to want to be treated in a certain way, and well, it never really happens."* The Ghanaian culture, inherited by either matrilineal or patrilineal, looks down on people who are born out of wedlock or find themselves inheriting from the patrilineal side but are staying with the mother's family, like Ayitey. This is what he said:

I don't know, but sometimes you feel odd because sometimes during family meetings, they give preference to certain people, like you need not to talk. You should allow better people to talk; you that sleeps outside, you need not to talk.

Other participants also mentioned how they value the relationship before committing themselves to it due to the disappointment they experienced from significant relationships in the past. Nips stated that: *"I have learnt to compartmentalize my relationships. We are course mates, and we don't go beyond that."* Crystabel added that *"I mean, I felt I do a lot to be appreciated and respected. So if I don't get that, I get...herrm defensive, so most of the time the cause of action is to cut off whoever it is and move on from the person and not go back there again."* Some participants also said they look out for people with whom they have common interests, like Awurasi stated: *"If I get someone who really understands me, I don't let the person go. So, I try to check up on them, I talk to them. Yeah, I think that's all."* Akua added:

I have a lot of supportive friends, like people who have the same stance on most of the subjects I am passionate about, so I mostly also engage them on calls and everything.

The above narrations from the participants describe how they perceived the love and connections they have for others and how they evaluate relationships before entering into them in order not to experience the rejection and disappointment they suffered in childhood.

### *Theme 3: Meaning in life (Striving for Significance and Contribution)*

The third theme tried to establish the meanings that the participants have made from their past experiences and how these experiences inform their choices and responsibilities, as well as the drive for success, completion, and perfection. The participants' perceptions, thoughts, feelings, values, beliefs, convictions, and conclusions in life depict the meanings they attached to their experiences. For instance, Crystabel had this to say:

I grew up with a lot of insecurities. As a child, I had been taught to grow up and be self-sufficient and be there for myself. It is very difficult to talk to other people when I have a problem, and even when those people have shown me that they really care and are interested in what I have to say, I feel second-guessed. So it makes me come off as someone who is overly confident. I pretend as if I do not want help or have emotions.

Other participants described how their experiences have made them not confident in life. Elorm sees the self as timid and cannot take any initiative or defend the self because he was not allowed to defend

the self in childhood. This is what he said: “ *I feel timid because I was brought up in a way that you only talk when you are being asked to, and now I am afraid to say the correct things or the truth to adults*”. Nips added:

I felt like my opinions did not matter; I stopped contributing. It always makes me unhappy, and I am not part of the family because my opinions do not matter. I had to live a certain way so that my parents would not have any reason to question me. I always have to put up a certain image so that I will look like a perfect person.

#### *Theme 4: Challenges and Growth*

Theme 4 looked at the challenges that the participants faced in childhood and how these challenges are influencing their lives in adulthood. These experiences describe instances where the participants felt helpless because they could not challenge the adults’ decisions and just had to obey. Tracy, for example, stated: “*My uncle used to drink a lot, so when I turned 8, I realized that maybe drinking is not so bad after all. So sometimes when he finishes drinking and there is a bit left in the glass, I will go and take it and drink it. That was when I started drinking.*” Ablah added:

I was sometimes the one sent to buy the alcohol for my stepmother. Yeah, she was the one who was taking the alcohol. Sometimes she will send my younger brother. My worry was that my younger brother would not learn to take alcohol; however, she actually introduced him to alcohol, which got me angry.

Some participants also reported some household dysfunctions that they were exposed to that have been detrimental to their lives growing up. This is what Candice had to say: “*I was exposed to certain things that affected me and are still affecting me,*” and it makes her insecure with men, hence “*making me not to trust anybody at all. Because I feel anyone who comes into my life will leave eventually, no matter how much the person loves me.*”

#### *Theme 5: Suicidal ideation*

The fifth theme also revealed that ACEs exacerbated suicidal ideation. Suicidal ideation encompasses a variety of thoughts, desires, and preoccupations related to death and self-harm. From the study, it is indicative that ACEs worsened the participants’ inner struggles. For them, such traumatic experiences were overwhelming. Consequently, death was the only option they found reasonable to manage the

trauma. Hence, these individuals threatened, contemplated, and attempted to end their lives. Only three of the 15 participants admitted to having no suicidal ideation. The rest of the participants have either attempted suicide or have suicidal ideation. This is what some of them had to say:

*Many times, I have had thoughts of ending my life. Even after a man kidnapped me and abused me, like the next day I just did not want to exist on earth. I wanted the earth to swallow me. I really felt bad about my body when I think of someone trying to abuse me. I sometimes feel that I can just die, and everything will go. (Lamisi)*

This suicidal behaviour by the participants reflects people who feel helpless and hopeless, as presented by Lamisi, Yaw, Elorm, Awurasi, and Candice. Candice said, “*I felt everything was not going well with me*”. Others also think of suicide as a sign of love for their loved ones. Tracy had this to say: “*I love my mum, so I felt like maybe killing myself will do my mum a favour*”. Some people, like Awurasi, think of suicide as a coping strategy to their “*loneliness and anxiety.*”

## Discussion

The study sought to explore emerging adults’ ACEs and later life effects on their psychosocial wellbeing. The guiding research questions were: (1) How do emerging adults who have experienced ACEs navigate their identity formation? (2) How do emerging adults who have experienced ACEs describe their sense of belonging? (3) Why do emerging adults who have experienced ACEs believe their experiences have affected their sense of meaning in life? We observed 5 themes: (1) identity formation; (2) Belonging; (3) Meaning making; (4) Challenges and growth; and (5) suicide.

The findings of the study are supported by<sup>[6][8]</sup>, who established that early adverse experiences in one’s life place individuals at high risk of health, psychological, and social challenges which may inform them to adopt either positive or negative ways of dealing with their adversities. It was found that participants had diverse opinions and meanings about their ACEs, which have in a way made them model their behaviour in their emerging adulthood as a form of safeguarding them from being victims like in their childhood<sup>[14][9]</sup>. Emerging adulthood is a period where young adults seek to define who they are, their values, and sense of belonging<sup>[1]</sup>. According to Adler<sup>[20]</sup>, identity formation is intricately tied to the concept of inferiority, which drives individuals to strive for mastery and competence in their chosen roles. In the early years of life, children often experience feelings of inferiority, stemming from their dependence on others, physical limitations, and social comparisons.

However, Adler<sup>[22]</sup> argued that these feelings of inferiority can become a powerful motivator for growth, fostering the development of skills and abilities that lead to a sense of self-efficacy. This emphasizes Glasser's<sup>[24]</sup> five genetic needs of each individual and how people try to connect or disconnect from others based on the treatment they get from people.

During emerging adulthood, individuals are tasked with overcoming these feelings of inferiority and developing a coherent sense of self. They explore different career paths, relationships, and social roles, searching for the ones that align with their values and aspirations<sup>[31]</sup> (Cheung et al., 2021). Adler (1965) believed that the ability to transform feelings of inferiority into a drive for growth is crucial for healthy identity development and connection with significant others<sup>[24]</sup>. Emerging adults may encounter setbacks or challenges that trigger feelings of inadequacy, but these struggles can ultimately lead to increased resilience and personal growth if they are approached with a mind-set focused on self-improvement and social contribution<sup>[32]</sup>).

A healthy development involves the ability to form meaningful connections with others, share experiences, and contribute to the welfare of the community<sup>[33]</sup>. Emerging adulthood is a period where the search for belonging and connection takes center stage. Young adults often face the challenge of building new social networks, establishing deep friendships, and forming intimate relationships that provide a sense of security and acceptance<sup>[34]</sup>. Some emerging adults who, by virtue of being firstborns, felt deprived of childhood fantasies because they masked their own needs to play the adulthood role in the lives of younger siblings and parents<sup>[35][36]</sup> later strive to meet these unmet needs<sup>[24]</sup>.

Both Adler (1963) and Glasser<sup>[24]</sup> emphasized that individuals who lack social interest or who struggle with feelings of isolation are more likely to experience mental health difficulties, such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideations. Emerging adults, therefore, must learn to balance their need for independence with the desire for social connection. Those who are able to establish meaningful relationships and contribute to their communities are more likely to experience a sense of belonging and fulfillment<sup>[37]</sup>.

Adler<sup>[22]</sup> asserted that the drive for significance is a key motivator in human development. From an early age, individuals strive to feel competent, valuable, and capable of making a meaningful impact on the world. In emerging adulthood, this drive for significance often leads individuals to ask fundamental questions about their purpose in life, role in society, and their contribution to the well-

being of others<sup>[38]</sup>. Adlerian theory highlights the importance of purposeful action, particularly the pursuit of goals that align with one's values and the greater good. Individuals who have a sense of meaning and feel that they are contributing to the common good are more likely to experience a sense of fulfillment and life satisfaction<sup>[39]</sup>.

Emerging adulthood, therefore, can be seen as a time when individuals navigate their desire for personal achievement with the need to contribute meaningfully to society. Those who find ways to integrate their personal goals with the broader societal context often experience a greater sense of purpose and fulfillment<sup>[37]</sup>. Emerging adults may face feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and even failure as they navigate the transition to adulthood. However, like Glasser<sup>[24]</sup> stated, no one should be a prisoner of their past; both Adler and Glasser encourage a growing mindset that focuses on learning from mistakes and building upon experiences. The practice of overcoming life challenges becomes the key to developing a healthy and resilient identity.

## **Conclusion**

Emerging adulthood is a transformative period in which young adults strive to define their identity, establish a sense of belonging, and pursue meaningful goals. Adler's focus on overcoming inferiority, developing social interest, and finding purpose provides a powerful framework for understanding the emotional and psychological tasks that young adults face. Glasser emphasizes embracing certain connecting principles to help emerging adults navigate the problems in this life stage with resilience, self-awareness, and a sense of social responsibility. This is to help develop fulfillment and purpose as they move into full adulthood.

## **Recommendations**

From the findings, it is clear that ACEs influence a person's thoughts, feelings, and judgment in many forms. It is recommended that affected individuals need their family and society to understand and help them build trust and redefine their identity to make new meanings in life. It is, therefore, important for mental health professionals to teach these individuals some behavioral changes, including building resilience, for them to heal from their past and build self-worth.

## Limitations

One major limitation of this study was the participants' willingness to open up about their ACEs. The interviewer used her counseling knowledge and skills to build rapport with the participants and assure them of confidentiality. This helped the participants build trust and confidence in the interviewer to open up about certain issues they had never shared with anyone. Again, the current study used individual interviews to collect data from the participants, which means the subjective views of the participants cannot be verified. This is in line with Felitti's<sup>[40]</sup> limitation in his study. As reported, ACEs were based on participants' memory, which is subject to errors related to recalling, perceived expectations, and prejudice. The hermeneutic phenomenological design chosen for this study helped to limit some of these errors through the meanings and insights evolving through dialogue between the researcher, participants, data, and literature.

## Statements and Declarations

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### *Citation diversity statement*

In the desire to enhance diversity in research on counseling seeking behavior of university students with ACEs, I was intentional about providing literature from a cross-cultural worldview. Inasmuch as ACE is a global issue, the literature combined studies from Ghana and globally, with emphasis on the diverse representation of the phenomenon. All citations used in the study have been appropriately referenced, and I have given credit to those who created the fundamentals that I am building upon.

### *Conflicts of interest*

I, the author, have no potential conflict of interest to report.



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